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SUBJECT: MILITARY AND THE MEDIA CONFERENCE AIMS TO IMPROVE INTERACTION

REF: A. BOGOTA 08899

[1](#)B. BOGOTA 06629

[1](#)C. BOGOTA 09526

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: On December 2, Embassy Bogota and the Ministry of Defense co-sponsored the third annual Public Forces and Journalism Seminar to improve military-media communication. Almost one hundred media and Armed Forces members (including the police) attended the meeting in Paipa, Boyaca Department. Participants commented that discussions helped reduce mutual suspicion and hostility, but open communication remains a distant goal. Military attendees criticized the press for skewing stories negatively, portraying guerrillas in a positive light, and ignoring advances of the Armed Forces against insurgents. Press attendees claimed that the military restricted and concealed information, ostracized reporters who disagreed with them, and used the media for free propaganda against guerrilla groups. Both sides welcomed the opportunity to air their concerns and improve relations. End summary.

#### Military Urges More Positive Stories, Downplays Negative

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Keynote speaker Minister of Defense (MOD) Jorge Uribe summarized military and police accomplishments over the last months. He announced that the military would welcome a one-day personnel swap between the Armed Forces and press to improve mutual understanding. Other military representatives including Vice Minister of Defense Andres Penate and police Public Affairs Liaison Col. Jairo Agudelo commented that the press influenced public opinion in important and sometimes erroneous ways. As an example, Agudelo showed a series of press headlines on safety in Bogota. Clippings dating back to 1996 cited Bogota as the most dangerous city in the hemisphere. Other headlines told of the public's fear of crime but then changed to reflect an improving situation, ending with accounts of the city's impressive security record and citizens feeling secure. Agudelo claimed that they were all exaggerated and demonstrated that the press directly influenced the public's view of security and therefore affected the armed forces' ability to work.

[1](#)3. (U) Military representatives asserted that their chain of command structures and national safety concerns contributed to the lack of communication with the press. Younger officers added in breakout sessions that they often were prohibited from commenting on high-profile military criminal cases like Guaitarilla, Cajamarca and Arauca (reftels A, B, and C) since the military did not want such cases debated by the public. Officers added that no one wanted to "give the enemy an advantage" in the conflict by damaging the military's morale or reporting strategies to the press. They also noted some details were classified and could not be released to the press. Panelists reiterated their frustration with some in the media who presented sympathetic stories on the guerrillas and portrayed the military in a negative light. They dubbed such stories "unpatriotic" and claimed they prompted the Colombian public to sympathize with illegal terrorists. As an alternative, Vice Minister Penate urged the press to produce more news stories on the demobilization and reinsertion process. Such "good news" pieces could help bridge the communication gap.

#### Media Requests More Understanding and Transparency

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[1](#)4. (SBU) Jaime Abello Banfi, President of the Antonio Narino Project, offered the press perspective and praised the previous two conferences for improving understanding. Daniel Fernando Patino of Caracol news agreed with Abello's comment on institutional culture clashes and said the military only wanted positive news items. He asserted that reporters were routinely made "persona non grata" for contradicting military counterparts. Maria Teresa Ronderos of the Free Press Foundation added that reporters were dependent upon military escorts for protection in combat zones. This put reporters in the precarious position of either reporting the military perspective or taking chances by going unescorted. When Penate requested further demobilization and "good news" coverage, some participants countered that the military

wanted the news to be a supplemental, free psychological operation in rural areas against insurgent groups.

15. (U) In the breakout session, media representatives urged their military counterparts to accept that reporting was not an issue of patriotism. Reports should be factual and inform the public. Patino added that public comments during the immediate aftermath of the Arauca case only underscored the unreliability of official sources in unflattering military situations. MOD Uribe agreed that it was important for the military to check facts before speaking to the press, but asserted that it was critical to stand by one's staff and believe in its abilities. The media representatives conceded that some press colleagues pushed aggressively, advanced an agenda, or otherwise deluded the public at times. Nevertheless, panelists stressed that greater transparency and information sharing with the press would be critical to improving relations and the military's profile in the press.

#### Suggestions to Make Progress -----

16. (U) Both military and media participants suggested exchanges and ongoing dialogue to close the communication gap. Abello suggested that the civilian MOD and vice ministers serve as interlocutors to promote greater understanding. Alvaro Sierra, an editor with El Tiempo, recommended that both sides agree to basic rules of interviewing and review other nations' military-press relationship.

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